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SUBJECT: URUGUAYAN ELECTIONS: PARTIES STRATEGIZE AS
CAMPAIGN HEATS UP

REF: MONTEVIDEO 411

11. (U) This telegram is sensitive but unclassified, and not for Internet distribution.

Summary

12. (U) With the internal elections behind them, both the incumbent Frente Amplio (FA) and the opposition National Party (Blancos) have begun to devise the strategies that they hope will lead them to victory in the October elections. The FA is playing up its traditional role as the leftist opposition to the historically monolithic party system, while working to leverage the popularity of incumbent President Tabare Vazquez. In contrast, the rhetoric of the opposition is aimed directly at FA candidate Jose "Pepe" Mujica, as the Blancos work to raise doubts in the minds of Uruguayan voters over his tendencies toward inconsistency. End Summary.

The Frente Amplio: A Call for Both Change and Continuity

13. (U) As a coalition of parties that has achieved steady gains against the traditional Colorado and National parties over the past several elections, the Frente Amplio now finds itself in unfamiliar territory: a presidential campaign in which they are the incumbent party. Further complicating matters is the fact that popular President Tabare Vazquez is ineligible for a second term, with the FA's future now in the hands of former Tupamaro guerrilla Jose "Pepe" Mujica (reftel). Correspondingly, the party faces a unique challenge: it must continue to appeal to the core voters that supported its prior campaigns to completely transform the political system, while stalwartly defending the status quo by promising continuity between Vazquez's policies and those of a Mujica administration.

14. (U) In order to achieve this objective, Mujica and his running mate, former Finance Minister Danilo Astori, have assumed diverging roles on the campaign trail, with both candidates on the offensive following a week of attacks by the Blancos. Mujica has taken up the part of the traditional Frente Amplio militant, portraying the movement as an agent of change due to its roots in what the FA characterizes as the failure of the traditional two-party system. Included in this message is an outcry against the "clientelism" of the Blancos - a thinly-veiled reference to allegations of corruption during Blanco candidate Luis Alberto Lacalle's 1990-1995 term as president. Mujica's speeches have also been punctuated with the rhetoric of militancy, as he has exhorted fellow party members to become "agitators" to draw in undecided voters. Above all, Mujica's central theme is an appeal to the common man: as he told one friendly audience, "Lacalle belongs to the upper class; I'm like you." As his wife, Senator Lucia Topolansky, recently divulged in a television interview, Mujica has even requested that he not

receive a salary as President, asking that the money be donated instead.

15. (U) While Mujica's rhetoric reminds audiences of the historical mission of the FA, his running mate's emphasis has been on the economic success of the Vazquez administration, citing positive statistics of foreign investment and growth over the past five years. Astori has also contrasted the boom under Vazquez with the failures of Lacalle, who "committed terrible errors of political economy" while president, according to Astori. According to the media, Mujica hopes to exploit the credibility Astori gives the team on economic issues by giving Astori free rein in the economic policy realm.

16. (U) For his part, President Vazquez has been active in defending his legacy and in leveraging his considerable popularity (a 61% favorable rating, according to the pollster Equipos Mori) in support of the FA ticket. At a recent dinner (also attended by Lacalle) honoring a former President, Vazquez argued that the country is "getting a little better every day" thanks to the policies of the FA government. Vazquez also plans to campaign within the interior of the country - the traditional stronghold of the Blancos, and an area in which the president is likely to have more success than Mujica due to his more moderate image.

The Blancos: Raising Fears About Mujica

17. (SBU) Following their surprise "victory" over the FA in the internal elections (reftel), Lacalle and his running

mate, Jorge Larranaga, have attempted to frame the election as a referendum on Jose Mujica, in an attempt to raise concerns in the minds of Uruguayan voters about the direction in which the former Tupamaro guerrilla would take the country both economically and politically. As reported in reftel, Lacalle began the general campaign by insinuating that Mujica not only would endanger potential foreign investment in Uruguay, but also that his plans to reform the constitution could include a constituent assembly process like that endorsed by Hugo Chavez. Lacalle has also sowed fears about Mujica's propensity to overspend, while promoting his own neoliberal credentials. Last week, Lacalle insisted that, if elected president, he would cut spending "with a buzzsaw", prompting retorts from Vazquez administration officials that Lacalle would eliminate key social programs.

19. (U) Blanco politicians have also focused on the perceived division between Mujica and Astori, with Blanco Senator Francisco Gallinal telling one newspaper that the Vice Presidential candidate's ego was "wounded and bleeding" following his second-place finish. Although Astori appeared more dutiful than enthusiastic when accepting the Vice Presidential nomination, he has campaigned with increased enthusiasm in recent days, and has fended off these attempts to divide him from Mujica by emphasizing the ideological unity of the ticket.

110. (SBU) While the Blancos took the offensive in the first few days following the internal elections, Lacalle and Larranaga have chosen not to respond to the FA's most recent comments, claiming that they are more comfortable engaging in debate over issues rather than in personal attacks. Another possible explanation for this silence is that the Blancos are distracted by internal housekeeping, with Lacalle and Larranaga working to consolidate the lists of candidates for Senate within their respective party factions.

The Colorados: Sports Hero for VP

111. (SBU) Pedro Bordaberry, the once-mighty but now cellar-dwelling Colorado Party's candidate for president, has remained relatively silent during much of the recent politicking, recently declaring that he would avoid alliances

with either the FA or the Blancos at this stage of the campaign. However, in the same announcement, he expressed misgivings similar to those of Lacalle concerning the possibility of a constituent assembly in a Mujica administration, indicating that his sympathies hew closer to the Blanco ticket than to the FA.

¶12. (U) Bordaberry announced Hugo de Leon, a former soccer star, as his running mate July 16. De Leon played for the Uruguayan national team from 1979 to 1990, and won five league titles as a player and coach for the Montevideo team Nacional. Bordaberry's choice of de Leon brought some flak from Mujica and Astori, who criticized his lack of experience.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: Mujica and Astori's energetic campaigning indicates that they have overcome the initial shock of the Blancos' "victory" in the internal elections and the headstart gained by the Lacalle/Larranaga ticket. However, the FA is still lagging behind, with July 12 polling giving the party 42% of likely voters compared to 46% for the Blancos and Colorados combined - a loss of two percentage points for the FA since June 28. End Comment.

Schandlbauer